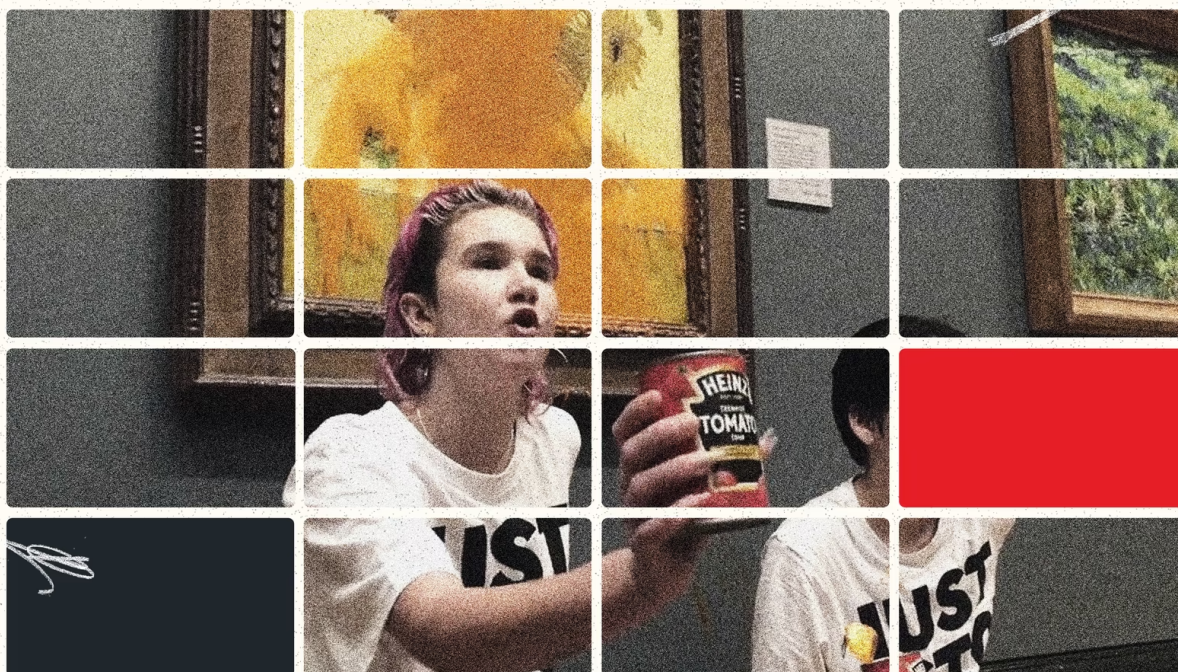


IDEAS

## Just How Safe Is Great Art?

A museum-security expert admits that “it’s pretty darn hard to protect a painting from somebody throwing a can of soup at it.”

By Caroline Mimbs Nyce



Just Stop Oil / AP

OCTOBER 17, 2022

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On Friday, in a bizarre act that immediately went viral, two climate activists covered a 130-ish-year-old Vincent Van Gogh painting with tomato soup at the National Gallery in London. They then proceeded to superglue themselves to the wall beneath the frame. “Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet?” one asked. The protesters were later charged criminally.

They were concerned about the planet, but also, at least purportedly, about the painting. A spokesperson for the group the protesters are affiliated with, Just Stop Oil, told *The New York Times* that the group had checked ahead of time to ensure the work was glazed—covered by a thin layer of glass—so that the soup would not damage the art. And glazed it was. Video shows that the orange soup did not seep into the yellow painting but rather rolled and dripped down the front, a barely perceptible layer clearly separating it from the art. The work reportedly suffered no damage, except to its frame.

Are all works of art in major museums protected from the threat of airborne canned-food products? I talked to Steve Keller, a professional museum-security consultant with 35 years of experience. His analysis? “It’s pretty darn hard to protect a painting from somebody throwing a can of soup at it.”

Keller and I discussed Friday’s incident and why he thinks people target art, as well as other types of security threats museums face.

*Our conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

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**Caroline Mimbs Nyce:** You’ve been in the industry for more than 35 years. Are museums caring more about security now than in the past?

**Steve Keller:** They are. They’re caring more about security, and the security tools that they have available to them are getting better constantly. And so the number of security breaches that we see, with the exception of these protests, has been reduced. We’re going years between major thefts rather than months between major thefts. And so it has helped security a great deal. These cameras, these transmitters—they never sleep. They’re there not just when the museum is open to the public, but they are

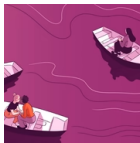
operating during those gray hours when the museum has docents and contractors and other people in them doing their thing, and the guards aren't necessarily in the galleries yet. So they're providing that 24-hour protection, and it has really helped.

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**Nyce:** Is the bigger concern protests like this, or heists?

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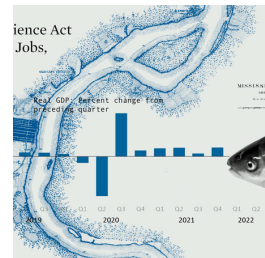
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**Keller:** Well, the heists so far have been our greatest concern. But when they go from touching a frame with some superglue, which is relatively harmless—scary, but harmless—to throwing things at the paintings, they've escalated it. I don't know whether they made a conscious effort to pick a painting that had glazing on it.

**Nyce:** They reportedly did. What do you make of that?

**Keller:** That's reckless. They've crossed the line. I don't think that's their decision to make, as to whether harm would occur. That moisture could seep in there. Or damage could occur just taking the painting down and taking it in and taking the glazing out and cleaning down on the cracks. So that concerns me. But I am happy to hear that at least somebody tried to make a decision not to throw it at a painting that wasn't covered.

**Nyce:** Is it common for works of art in museums to be glazed?

**Keller:** It is for some types of works of art and not for others. Museums will often put glass in front of certain paintings and types of art where the glass doesn't dramatically reduce the ability to see brush strokes. But it does in others, and so they won't glaze where it might reduce the educational value of the painting by blocking the view. Now, they also will not put glass over—well, sometimes they will, but they'll be very careful what they put over—something like a chalk painting or a charcoal or a pastel, because the static electricity from the glass can suck the chalk off the painting and cause damage.

**Nyce:** Just to clarify, are those two different things? You can glaze a painting—is that like painting some sort of thing over top of it?

**Keller:** No, no. It's just a piece of glass. There's also a third reason why they might not want to do it. And that is that, in order to put the glass in, some frames have to be modified. Some older frames aren't manufactured to have a piece of glass in front of them. And so they would have to get a router and route out that frame. If the frame is an important item—like, it was selected by Monet to put on the painting—then they're not going to want to modify that at all. They're not going to put glazing on there.

Sometimes they use glass, and sometimes they use polycarbonate, like plexiglass. It's just like you would buy a picture frame with a piece of glass in it. It would be the same principle.

**Nyce:** When you go to a big gallery, are most famous paintings protected in some way?

**Keller:** No, not at most museums. There are many types of protection. Some paintings are protected from theft. They might have transmitters behind them, or they might have a miniature camera embedded in the ceiling above that looks down and

has the ability to analyze the motion in front of the painting and alert when somebody gets so close that they might touch. There might be some sort of a beam in front of the painting that breaks the beam when you reach into it.

But it's pretty darn hard to protect a painting from somebody throwing a can of soup at it. It's very, very difficult.

So then they'll have to have guards who actually intervene, or other methods, like searching parcels when people bring them into the building to make sure that there's nothing in there that could damage the art. The trend right now for major museums is to provide the state-of-the-art, latest technology on every item in the collection. Several major museums in the U.S. are in the process of achieving that. And the smaller museums will follow suit once the largest do. But it's a fairly expensive proposition.

**Nyce:** The climate protester was talking about how you should care as much about protecting the planet as you do about protecting a work of art. What's your reaction to using art in that way, to make that kind of statement?

Read: A trip to a museum for convincing Americans about climate change

**Keller:** They've made their statement now. I think they need to move on and give the museum some relief. If I had to guess at the political attitude of your typical museum worker, they're environmentalists. They're more liberal in their thinking. They're more supportive of the cause. And environmental activists are not winning many friends by doing this to museums. They made their point, and now move on.

**Nyce:** What was your reaction when you first heard the news?

**Keller:** I was not surprised. Every 10 years or so, somebody will throw something at a painting or a statue or sculpture and try to do damage. I wasn't surprised that this had

to do with an environmental movement. That's been pretty frequent—gluing their hands to frames, and that sort of thing. So it's just a matter of time until that sort of thing escalates. We've been fortunate that they've been touching the frame and not the canvas, but you never know. There's always somebody that has less common sense and discretion than the previous protesters.

**Nyce:** Does it tend to be the environmentalists?

**Keller:** Not really, but it has been in recent months. The National Gallery of London has had a number of incidents in the past that were from environmental activists. I don't know why they seem to gravitate toward that institution.

However, in the 1980s, when [Ronald] Reagan was president, somebody threw red paint at a [Peter Paul] Rubens painting in San Francisco in protest of his economic policies—like that makes perfect sense. [*Laughs.*] I don't know what their reason for it was other than they said that it was protesting his policies. Why they thought that was a tie-in, I don't know.

**Nyce:** Why do you think people target art?

**Keller:** I think the environmentalists feel that we're running out of time and they need to get as dramatic as they can possibly be. And I think they target museums because they're soft targets. They know that they're not going to get shot by a cop or something like that. The event will be over with and calmed down by the time the police arrive. And so they think the security guards aren't going to overreact with them.

**Nyce:** More generally, how much is your job like it's portrayed in heist films? Or *National Treasure*?

**Keller:** My job is kind of divided into two types of tasks. On one side, I'm a management consultant who tells museums the best way to run their security operation. But on the other side, we have an engineering division where we design the super-high-tech systems that protect museums. And it's a constant battle to stay ahead of hackers and so forth. We're to the point where our security systems run on totally dedicated closed networks. There are no word processors on our networks.

**Nyce:** Oh, wow. Hacking is real, like in the heist movies.

**Keller:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. You could hack in and turn off the alarm system and have your way. Our job is to make sure that our systems are closed. Everything is in a conduit; there are security screws on the junction box; the network never touches the internet; there are no word processors or wireless or any other portal into our systems other than the server that runs the security software and the operator terminal, the command center. We even disable the DVD tray and the USB port so that the guard can't bring his own video game in and stick it in the computer and try to play games on the midnight shift and bring in a virus by mistake. So it's a high-tech game that we're playing, and it changes constantly and keeps me up at night. But that's what keeps me young. (*Laughs.*)

**Nyce:** Your line of work is so interesting, because museums are oftentimes open to the public, and we've decided these works of art should be viewable by everyone, and you're on the security and protection side. How do you balance that? Like, obviously you don't want it to be like, *You could look through a little pinhole at the Mona Lisa. You can look at it from half a mile away.* How do you balance accessibility against security?

**Keller:** The security people understand that there does have to be access to the art. I mean, that's what it's all about.

Banks don't take millions of dollars and put them in plastic bags and hang them on the wall so everybody can walk right up to them. But we do basically the same thing in museums and hang the assets right out on the wall. So it's our job, then, to either use technology or develop technology that protects the art, to hire honest guards that are trainable and able to meet the challenge and alert and so forth. And we have to keep them alert because it's the world's most boring job. It might be great for you to go to a museum and see it for a day, but they stand in that same gallery year after year, and so they get mental fatigue. And so we have to rotate them around and give them responsibilities that keep them stimulated and keep them fresh.

It's a challenge. But we try to predict the items that might be most vulnerable. Which are not necessarily most valuable; some things have symbolic significance to them. And then we try to predict what the next targets might be and advise our clients that they maybe need to put special security on those items.

**Nyce:** Is there anything that you wish people better understood about what you do? Or that you wish I had asked you about?

**Keller:** We try to be sympathetic and understanding. We're all on this Earth with them. I wish the protesters would understand that—they may not see it as doing harm, but they're doing harm to museums that are actually an ally of theirs. For example, a museum might have to add \$100,000 worth of additional security now for the next 20 years because it had this incident. And that's money out of the educational program, which may not be as important to them as saving the Earth. But it is pretty important to saving the country. I wish they would recognize that.

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